

The Srivaishnava Way of Life: The Value of Initiation (Pancasamskara) in the Art of Liberation*

Natalia Safina

History of Philosophy Department
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
6 Miklukho-Maklaya Str.
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: videhidevi@gmail.com

Abstract—Indian culture is inseparably linked with philosophy and religion. The art of ritual, no matter how complex and symbolic it may be, is based on the religious and philosophical tradition and strictly consistent with its main goal. In this article we consider the features of initiation of the pancasamskara rituals in the srivaishnava tradition and their connection with the main purpose of this system – achievement of liberation (moksha). The article presents also the first part of a broader study of the srivaishnava traditional way of life, which formalized in a more explicit form in the 12th-14th centuries in the South India. The texts of Pancaratra tradition, works of visistadvaita-vedanta thinkers, as well as some other features of Indian culture and religion had a significant impact on the formation of the ritual system, daily duties of the srivaishnava adepts, art of Visnu-Narayana worship and ethics. Pancasamskara rituals (samasrayana) include application of special symbols (sankha-cakra, pundras) on body, obtaining mantras for practice, purification ceremonies and teaching of sacred texts. The article also examines the philosophical, religious and cultural foundations of these rituals and their significance for the srivaishnava tradition.

Keywords—*srivaishnavism; Pancaratra; visistadvaita-vedanta; pancasamskara; samasrayana; prapatti; upanayana; initiation; Visnu-Narayana; moksha*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian culture is characterized by a specific understanding of art. It includes areas not only traditional for Western culture, but also beyond it. The art of reciting sacred texts, singing hymns, yoga as the art of body work, the art of temple dance and rituals, the art of Vedic sacrifice (yajña) and in a broader sense the art of liberation (moksha) which is the main goal of most Indian religious and philosophical systems. All these examples play an important role in Indian culture, which is very different from the role that art plays in European culture. In this article we describe in more details the art of pañcasamskāra rituals which is the first and most important stage of life of śrīvaiṣṇava tradition.

The religious system of vaiṣṇavism is quite old. It is based on a vast corpus of Indian sacred texts, such as dharmaśāstras, Ālvars' poetry, Pāñcarātra saṃhitās, Viṣṇu

and Bhāgavata-purāṇa, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa etc. These texts were commented lots of times in different centuries by śrīvaiṣṇava acaryas who affected philosophical and religious aspects of the teaching, developed and strengthened śrīvaiṣṇavism and viśiṣṭādvaita-vedānta. The issues of the vaiṣṇava code of conduct, their behavior, way of life in the vaiṣṇava community, daily routines and practices of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa worship were described attentively both in the original texts and in the commentaries.

The religious duties and code of the śrīvaiṣṇavas' conduct were formed, first of all, under long influence of the Vedic prescriptions from the Kalpasūtras and Smṛtis (Manu, Śāṇḍilya, Vasiṣṭha, Viṣṇu) for the four varṇas of the Indian society (varṇāśramadharmā) [1]. In addition to Vedic literature the poetry of the Ālvars and the tantric literature of the Pāñcarātra tradition exerted the strongest influence on the formation of social and religious duties during the 9th-11th centuries. The conflict in the matters of the authority of Pāñcarātra saṃhitās and its antiquity between the two systems, Brahmanical and tantric, had been resolving by philosophers and theologians of śrīvaiṣṇavism for several centuries. Most of the philosophers of viśiṣṭādvaita-vedānta defended the Pāñcarātric texts [2]. For example, the Āgamaprāmāṇya of Yāmūnācārya (10-11th cent.) plays the key role in the proof of the validity of Pāñcarātrāgama. Yāmūna prove the theistic Vedānta and refutes all argumentations against this tradition [3]. The Pāñcarātraraksā of Venkaṭanātha (13–14th centuries) also was devoted to this issue. On the one hand, the śrīvaiṣṇava thinkers were mostly Brahmanas, therefore they strictly followed the Brahmanical and Vedāntic prescriptions in their behavior and teaching. On the other hand, there were also authoritative Pāñcarātra saṃhitās dedicated to the cult of veneration of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. The saṃhitās prescribed special rituals and duties for the vaiṣṇavas¹. The stable and

¹ The understanding and perception of Pāñcarātra texts by śrīvaiṣṇava thinkers was formed under influence of the context of their own tradition, i.e. under the influence of Brahmanism, Vedānta, Ālvars' poetry, works of predecessors. The earlier Pāñcarātric texts were formed in the different historical and religious context. Probably they were written by religious figures and ministers of royalty. In this connection, as Mumme writes, these texts were not always understood by śrīvaiṣṇavas and were studied selectively [2].

*The paper is prepared under the project supported by the grant of Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) № 16-03-00806.

strictly regulated rules of life for the followers of śrīvaiṣṇavism were established by 12-14th centuries as a result of combining the precepts of the two traditions. These rules were discussed in details, for example, in the *Nityagrantha* of Rāmānuja, as well as in the works of his preceptors such as *Saccaritrarakṣā* of Veṅkaṭanātha, *Āhnikā-kārikā* of Śrīraṅganārāyaṇācārya.

The full picture of śrīvaiṣṇava way of life is quite complex. It assumes the passing of initiation rituals into śrīvaiṣṇavism, the fulfillment of the various daily rituals throughout life according to the rules and five time-periods (*pāñcakāla prakriyā*), understanding of their meanings, symbolism and connection with the philosophical system of the viśiṣṭādvaita, the study of sacred texts, cultivation of certain qualities of character and also strict control and discipline. The main goal of all these prescriptions is a pious life which would help to gain the mercy of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, to gain liberation (*mokṣa*) from suffering and the cycle of rebirths and return to the divine abode. Nowadays not all rituals are performed such scrupulously as it was in the Middle Ages. However, the orthodox śrīvaiṣṇavas strictly follow the performance of their duties so far.

II. PAÑCASAMSKĀRA (SAMĀŚRAYAṆA)

As it was already mentioned, the Pāñcarātra saṁhitās prescribe their own standards of the code of conduct for the vaiṣṇavas. First of all, it is necessary to go through the ritual of initiation called *pañcasamskāra* ("five rituals"), which is also known approximately since the 12th century as *samāśrayaṇa*

(resorting). *Parāśaraviśiṣṭaparamadharmaśāstra* (PS) of Parāśara (mid of the 12th cent.) describes in detail all five rituals. The 14th century hagiographical text *Ārāyirappaṭi Kuruparamparāpirapāvam* (AK) also mentions the rites of samāśrayaṇa and describes the ideal picture of the śrīvaiṣṇavism². Striving for a spiritual ideal is a distinctive feature of Indian philosophical and religious systems including śrīvaiṣṇavism. Many texts from the Purāṇas and *Ramāyaṇa* to the Middle Ages texts, such as AK, exemplified the ideal behavior of rulers, hermits and sages designed to establish the moral, spiritual and religious ideals of life in society. There are several stories in the AK related to the rituals of initiation in śrīvaiṣṇavism including the *pañcasamskāra* story for the founders of the tradition of Yāmunācārya and Rāmānuja.

Pañcasamskāra consists of five separate rituals: *tāpasamskāra*, *punḍrasamskāra*, *namasamskāra*, *mantrasamskāra*, *ijyāsamskāra* (also known as *yāgasamskāra*) [6]. This sequence of the rituals is strictly regulated and it is preceded by a preliminary fire ritual (*homa*). *Pañcasamskāra* rituals are traditionally conducted by

both householders and ascetics ācāryas³, who belong to one of the seventy-four lines of Rāmānuja successors. More often initiation is carried out for a group of people by ācāryas of śrīvaiṣṇava *mathas*⁴. Nowadays the entire cycle of rituals is performed on a special, astrologically auspicious day in the morning. Nevertheless, according to the PS, the best way is to conduct each ritual with the corresponding *homa* consecutively on different days.

The first ritual *tāpasamskāra* is the core of *pañcasamskāra*. Actually, only after passing this rite a person can be considered as a śrīvaiṣṇava. The adept cannot read the sacred *mantras* that are transmitted at initiation, as well as perform the worship of Viṣṇu (*pūjā*). In a broader sense, śrīvaiṣṇava is one who surrendered to Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa, but for the subsequent worshipping rites he must be initiated [7]. The word *tāpa* in Sanskrit means "heat" and is often used as a refer to austerity. During the *tāpasamskāra*, the Viṣṇu's marks (*liṅgas*) are branded on the shoulders of the initiate with small incandescent copper, silver or even golden rods in the form of a conch and disc. The disk (*sudarśana-cakra*) and the conch (*śaṅkha*), which Viṣṇu holds in his hands, are the symbols of protection, spiritual energy and blessing for the vaiṣṇavas. In the *R̥gveda* (1.130.9) the disk (of the sun) is presented as an invincible weapon. It is also mentioned as the Wheel of Time. The conch is a symbol of prosperity and purification. There are three more symbols of Viṣṇu traditionally applied to the body of the initiate – a mace (*gadā*), a sword (*khaḍga*) and a bow (*śārṅga*)⁵ [8]. However, during the time, the procedure of *pañcasamskāra* was slightly modified. Even the orthodox śrīvaiṣṇavas do not brand these three symbols today.

The branding of *śaṅkha-cakra* has a meaning of purifying act of the human body, getting rid of defects (*doṣa*) and getting the opportunity to exhaust one's karma and achieve liberation [9]. Fire is considered as the most powerful means of purification. The Vedic sources and the Pāñcarātra saṁhitās both emphasize that only those who wear the symbols of Viṣṇu on the body have a permission to perform *pūjā*, included in the daily duties of each śrīvaiṣṇava. Such Vedic texts as *Bāṣakala-saṁhitā* of the *R̥gveda* and *Manopaniṣad* mention the ritual of wearing these marks as well as the Pāñcarātra saṁhitās. Veṅkaṭanātha in his *Saccaritrarakṣā* refers to the passages from these texts to prove the authenticity and antiquity of this ritual.

The second ritual – *punḍrasamskāra* – is the application of the Viṣṇu's signs on different parts of the body with a special paste. Vaiṣṇavas apply *ūrdhvapunḍra* (vertical *punḍra*) in the form of two white vertical lines with one red or yellow strip (it depends on school) in the middle. The

³ There are restrictions on the conducting of rituals with fire for ascetics. Therefore, the *homa* which precedes the *pañcasamskāra* rituals is usually performed by a married couple, appointed by the ascetic ācārya. The rest of the rituals he conducts independently.

⁴ As mentioned above, initiation is conducted for both men and women of any castes. A detailed description of the samāśrayaṇa performed for women in 2001 and 2003 in Chennai and Kanchipuram suggested by Raman in her article 'Samasrayana in Srivaisnavism'.

⁵ According to the PS, the mace symbol was put on the center of the forehead, the sword on the heart area and the bow on the skull.

² Both texts were examined by S. Raman in her articles «Samasrayana in Srivaisnavism» [4], and "Initiation and conversion in Medieval South India". PS describes this ritual as for the dedication of the Brahmanas, performed also by the Brahmanas. In AK this ritual is also performed mainly for the Brahmanas (men). Although one episode mentions the possibility for women and lower castes [5].

form of ūrdhvapuṇḍra most often means the feet of Viṣṇu, but also it could be drawn in the form of a flame (mostly in temples' idols), a flower bud or a bamboo leaf according to the rules of different vaiṣṇava schools. During the pañcasamśkāra ritual this sign is applied first time on the forehead of the adept (*tilaka*) and on other parts of his body with the corresponding mantras. Traditionally, twelve puṇḍras for men and two for women are applied⁶. In the Pāñcarātra tradition twelve mantras with the Viṣṇu's names are recited during the puṇḍrasamśkāra. This is a kind of protective signs of Viṣṇu, which are intended not only to honor the deity, but also to eliminate adverse influences and maintain purity during the religious duties. The rituals, whether the study of the Vedas, the worship of Viṣṇu or the sacrifice etc. can become useless without the protection and purity. The rules of wearing the Viṣṇu signs and reviews of other rituals are discussed in detail in many works of śrīvaiṣṇava thinkers with numerous references to the Pāñcarātra saṃhitās and Smṛtis. For example, in the *Saccaritarakṣā* Veṅkaṭanātha describes the various materials for applying ūrdhvapuṇḍra: it can be a white clay, sandal paste etc., mined only in special places such as Srīraṅgam, Melukote (Tirunārāyaṇapuram) or on the banks of sacred rivers and in others holy places [10]. The vaiṣṇavas put the ūrdhvapuṇḍra also in temples on various ritual objects, on the walls of houses, above the entrance doors etc.

During the *nāmasamśkāra* a person gets a new name in the śrīvaiṣṇava tradition and the suffix "*dāsa*" (servant)⁷. New name helps him to realize himself as a God's devotee. This part of the ritual can be skipped if the name has been obtained earlier via the Vedic ritual such as birth (*nāmakaraṇa*), tonsure (*cūḍākaraṇa*) or receiving the sacred thread (*upanayana*). Without a vaiṣṇava name one cannot participate the next part of the initiation – to acquire the sacred śrīvaiṣṇava mantras, which are necessary to achieve mokṣa.

A new follower who has received *śaṅkha-cakra*, *puṇḍras* and name is qualified to participate in the *mantrasamśkāra* rite. It includes the initiation to the sacred *Tirumantra*: *om namo nārāyaṇāya* ||. This *mantra* is the root mantra of śrīvaiṣṇavism (*Mūlamantra*). It is mentioned in the *Lakṣmī Tantra* and *Ahīrbudhnyasamhitā* along with other mantras in the corresponding sections dedicated to the meaning and types of mantras and their practice with meditation. The origin of Tirumantra is probably more ancient than the Pāñcarātra tradition. It can be found in the hymns of the Ālvārs as part of the temple rites [11]. In addition to the Tirumantra, two more mantras are taught: *Dvayamantra* – *śrīmanārāyaṇacaraṇau śaraṇaṃ prapadye | śrīmate nārāyaṇāya namaḥ* || and *Caramaśloka* from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* – *sarvadharmān parityajya mām ekaṃ śaraṇaṃ vraja* ||

ahaṃ tvā sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ ||. These mantras are interpreted in accordance with the tradition of Pāñcarātra and along with the Tirumantra are mandatory for daily practice. The hymns to divine spouse of Viṣṇu - Lakṣmī, *Puruṣasūkta*, *Viṣṇugāyatrī*, the names of all teachers of the tradition are also recited during mantrasamśkāra.

Ijyāsamśkāra (*yāgasamśkāra*) is the receiving the statue (*mūrti*) of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa by the follower and the explanation of the rules and home practices for daily worship. The best image of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa is *sālagrāma*, a special kind of black stone, mined on the Gandak river in Nepal. According to *Īśvarasamhitā* (ch.20), *Padmasamhitā* (ch.3) and some other texts, *sālagrāma* is considered as a self-manifested form of Viṣṇu. That is why it does not need to perform the ritual of sanctification (*prāṇapratiṣṭhā*). If *sālagrāma* is not available, it is possible to make the image of gold, silver, copper and other materials. Next, the *mūrti* must be consecrated to be used in further daily worship; meaning of the sacred texts of śrīvaiṣṇavism and instructions for their study are transferred to the follower⁸.

III. CONCLUSION

The five rituals of pañcasamśkāra not only initiate the seeker into śrīvaiṣṇavism, but also prepare him for daily service to God and His followers. According to Raman, samāśrayaṇa is regarded as an analog of the *upanayana*⁹ in Brahmanism (*smārtism*). It helped to achieve equality between the Tantric tradition and orthodox Brahmanism and to assert the legitimacy of the Tantric ritual [12]. Through the pañcasamśkāra purification one stands on the path of a pious, pure life and gets the opportunity to achieve liberation. Such initiation is prescribed for all śrīvaiṣṇavas also because almost all kinds of daily activities are somehow connected to the worship. The food offered to the deity during the *pūjā* and to all followers of Viṣṇu, must be prepared only by the initiated person who has performed the cleansing rituals. The concept of purity for śrīvaiṣṇavas is very important. Varadachari wrote, the system was so strict earlier that even a cup of water could not be taken by śrīvaiṣṇava from the uninitiated [13]. It may sound like excessive prejudice. However, by the *prapatti* doctrine¹⁰ of śrīvaiṣṇavism it is possible to reach the deep understanding of the meaning of such requirements. Prapatti is a special state of "trust" in God, deep love and devotion. The purity of worship comes from love of God and a special sense of reverence for Him. One feels himself weak in front of the divine will, defeated envy, anger, greed etc. He appeals to divine mercy and relies entirely on God in the act of prapatti. Thus, he naturally seeks to offer to God or to His follower only the best and purest.

⁸ Nowadays the *ijyāsamśkāra* ritual is often omitted. Ācārya gives instructions after the ceremony. It can be given also by the eldest member of śrīvaiṣṇava family from the birth of initiated.

⁹ Upanayana as one of the most important samśkāras in Brahmanism is the obtaining of the sacred thread (*upavīta*). It symbolizes the initiation and beginning of the study of the Vedas by the young men from the three first varṇas.

¹⁰ For more details on the prapatti doctrine and its features, see, for example, my article [14].

⁶ For example, the rules for applying puṇḍras are described in Padmapurāṇa. Each of the twelve puṇḍras corresponds to the twelve forms of Viṣṇu: Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, Govinda, Viṣṇu, Madhusūdana, Trivikrama, Vāmana, Śrīdhara, Hṛṣīkeśa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara. Keśava and Dāmodara puṇḍras usually put for women.

⁷ Usually the new śrīvaiṣṇava followers are named by the Viṣṇu's names or the names of His suite, or by that name of Viṣṇu, which corresponds to the month of the initiation.

Nowdays there is no exact evidence of how ancient the pañcasamṣkāra rites or tāpasamṣkāra, as the core of initiation are. According Varadachari the applying of *ūrdhvaṇḍras* was probably the earliest rite. *Tāpa* is mentioned in the 7th-9th century Ālvārs' hymns¹¹. This ritual began to be conducted by the vaiṣṇavas presumably from this time. After Rāmānuja, tāpasamṣkāra became mandatory for all śrīvaiṣṇavas. Raman emphasizes that pañcasamṣkāra was not only a ritual of initiation, but, at least from the middle of the 12th century it was used as a way to convert to śrīvaiṣṇavism¹² from other traditions like Śaivism [15]. Such treatment could occur, for example, as a result of a loss in a philosophical and religious dispute, or as a result of the powerful influence of the viśiṣṭādvaita-vedānta and śrīvaiṣṇavism on the masses.

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¹¹ For example, the hymn to Viṣṇu from Tiruppallantu of Periyalvar (9th cent.) mentions the applying of the disc and shell.

¹² According to Raman, the period of religious identification and consolidation of śrīvaiṣṇavism occurred in the 10th-14th centuries and "it can also be plausibly argued that this transition was in the process of transforming initiation ritual such as the pañcasamṣkāra, incorporating the older features of self-identification such as the branding, in order to set oneself apart with vehemence, as a religious elite, from the Śaivas"[16].